

Listening Comprehension

Today, I'm going to talk about an important point in English academic writing, called a thesis statement. I will start by playing a conversation that is typical of many that I have had with Japanese students.

Jones: Taro. Have you done the homework?

Taro: Yes. Here you are. Could you look at it now and tell me what you think?

Jones: Okay... Let's see... So, you wrote about the consumer tax. We are paying a little more tax than before.

Taro: Yes, it's hard, and the pay for my part-time work is still the same.

Jones: In Britain, we call it value added tax or VAT. Although it's higher than Japanese consumer tax, we don't have to pay this tax when we buy food, clothes, and other everyday commodities.

Taro: Another professor told me about it, and I wrote about it. Here in Japan, everybody has to pay consumer tax no matter how poor he or she is. I gave it as one of the reasons why I do not like this 3% raise of consumer tax in the conclusion at the end.

Jones: That's a good conclusion. But, you should have also said that earlier in your essay. You don't say what you think until the last paragraph. You should have added a thesis statement at the end of the first paragraph.

Taro: What is a thesis statement?

Jones: The thesis statement usually comes at the end of the introduction, and it gives the reader an idea of what you are going to discuss.

Taro: I see.

Jones: If you wrote at the end of the first paragraph that you don't like the consumer tax, then, the reader will understand you much better. If you don't have a thesis statement, it's hard for your reader to find out whether you like the consumer tax or not until he or she gets to the last paragraph.

Taro: Thank you very much, Professor Jones. I'll add a thesis statement every time I write

an essay in English.

Jones: Excellent!

Narrator:

So... In the conversation, we heard that a thesis statement is a very important part of academic writing. It is the key that unlocks the rest of the essay for the reader.

One of my American friends who has been teaching English to exchange students from Japan for twenty years used to tell me that very often Japanese students do not make their position clear until they come to the end of their essay. When he read the essays written by Japanese students, he said, he almost always felt uneasy because he couldn't find whether the student was supporting the idea in question or was opposed to it until the last paragraph where he finally found it in the conclusion. The essays that Japanese students wrote didn't have any thesis statement in the introduction, and that was a big problem.

The thesis statement usually comes at the end of the introduction, and it tells the reader what this essay is about, or what the writer is going to say in the essay. If Taro doesn't like the 8% consumer tax, he should write a thesis statement like: "The Japanese consumer tax is not good because this tax makes life more difficult for poor people" before he goes on to write the reasons why the tax is bad.

If Taro writes in his introduction paragraph that the consumer tax is not good, then the reader will easily keep up with his discussion. When he goes on to say that big companies do not usually pay consumer tax while small businesses have to pay a lot, the reader will know that Taro gives this example to show that this tax is unfair.

As I mentioned earlier, Japanese people traditionally don't have a thesis statement in their essay, but nowadays more and more people are becoming aware of its importance. It is especially important when you write for an English-speaking audience, they will expect one, and it can be confusing when it is missing.

English-speaking people go to a lot of effort to make their essays easier for readers to understand or easier for readers to agree with the writer. The thesis statement is one good example of this style.